Interreligious dialogue: the way to peace

Celebrating 50 years of the Declaration "Nostra Aetate"

The logo used for the official conference, organized in Rome by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Declaration Nostra Aetate. The video is entitled “The Leaven of Good” and was created by the Pontifical Council for this joyous anniversary. It is available online at this link: https://vimeo.com/145252146

"The Catholic Church rejects nothing

that is true and holy in these religions”,

which “often reflect a ray of that Truth

which enlightens all men" (NA 2)

The span of **50 years** in the biblical world immediately brings to mind the grace of the **Jubilee Year**. And so, as Pope Francis also recalled during his homily for the opening of the Jubilee of Mercy, the 50 years that have passed since the close of Vatican II are a time to celebrate. During the meeting that was held at the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome on December 2 for the 50th anniversary of Nostra Aetate, the Conciliar Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non- Christian Religions, **Cardinal Kurt Koch**, the president of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, recalled that “this commemoration has the character of a small jubilee and we have every reason to celebrate.” He added that this declaration “is the shortest text of the Council, but has changed history.”

Tracing the history of this document, it is important to remember that initially the text was meant to speak **exclusively on the relation between the Church and the Jews**. In this regard, John XXIII’s meeting with Jules Isaac, a French Jewish historian and survivor of the Holocaust, was providential. The two were able to meet thanks to the mediation of a tireless promoter of dialogue,

the Venetian Maria Vingiani, the then Councillor of Fine Arts in Venice. After that meeting, Pope John XXIII entrusted Cardinal Augustin Bea with the task of working to prepare a document that would address relations with the Jews. Only afterwards was the declaration extended to address other religious traditions. Cardinal Koch summarized this when he said: "**the Church has a special relationship with Judaism that she does not have with other religions although she speaks about it in a larger declaration**."

For this 50th anniversary we wanted to publish a few of the responses to this historic document by Jewish and Muslim people in the Holy Land.

It is evident that re-reading Nostra Aetate today has a particular tone within the only context in the world where Christians live in a society in which the majority of people are Jewish and Muslim, unlike in the West where Jews and Muslims are a minority.

The Patriarchal Vicar **Fr. David Neuhaus** explains this well in an article he published on the website of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem: "Whereas for the formulators of Nostra Aetate, the watershed in Christian-Jewish relations was the Shoah, which provoked an awakening to the prevalence of a teaching of contempt for Jews in a part of Christian doctrine, from the perspective of many Holy Land Christians, the question of Palestine is at the center of relations with Jews and Muslims. Whereas dialogue from the European perspective often includes a focus on the struggle against anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, the focus on justice and peace is an essential element of any prospective interreligious dialogue within the Holy Land context."

Christians and Muslims: a common call to action

"The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems.

They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself;

merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth,

who has spoken to men;

they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees,

just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself" (NA3)

In his article, Father Neuhaus also recounts how in 2000, at the end of a five year-long Synod, the Catholic Church in the Holy Land published a pastoral plan, which also reflected on Nostra Aetate, making the Holy Land a concrete field in which to work and experience dialogue. As the Patriarchal Vicar noted: "It is interesting to note that whereas, in discussing the relationship with Muslims, Nostra Aetate begins with common religious principles, the Synod document mentions common religious principles in the last place, after stressing the other important levels of commonality: historical experience, social neighborliness, co-existence and civil identity. In very realistic terms […], the Synod document describes the positive and negative aspects of contemporary Christian-Muslim co-existence, laying out a program for the development of this co-existence."

Mustafa Abu Sway – holder of the Integral Chair for the Study of Imam Ghazali's work at the Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa and Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, as well Professor of Philosophy and Islamic

Studies at the same University – granted us an interview in 2015, in which he stresses the importance of acting together. The starting point for greater cooperation between Christians and Muslims, due to shared values, concerns the defense of the family, which is central to the two traditions. Abu Sway continues: “It is time to also accord the larger human family its proper place, and renew the call for wiping the debt of the third world. The south needs a break from the impact of decades and centuries of colonialism. Catholics (also other Christians) and Muslims, the two largest religion can and should address global issues including climate change, poverty, disease, famine, illiteracy, and of course the roots of political violence that plagues many parts of the world.”

Returning to the publication of Nostra Aetate, Abu Sway recognizes that this document was a milestone in the relationship between the Catholic Church and other religions, and he asks if, in the future, when drafting similar documents, the Church will consult a Muslim scholar. Moreover, in the process of dialogue between the two communities, the professor from Jerusalem recalls the open letter entitled “**A Common Word Between Us and You**”, which was addressed to Christian leaders on October 13, 2007. The author of the letter was Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, but there were many signatories of this text, which reads: “Muslims and Christians together make up over half of the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.”

Speaking of peace, Abu Sway comments on the comprehensive Agreement signed by the Holy See and the State of Palestine in 2014, affirming that, in this way, “the Vatican took a major step to advance peace in the Holy Land.” It brings to mind the words of Pope Francis to the Israeli authorities on his trip to the Holy Land: “**The ‘two State solution’ becomes a reality and does not remain a dream**.” The hope that the current state of things will soon come to an end is deep in the words of the Palestinian scholar. Referring to the prayer of June 2014 in the Vatican Gardens, the Professor draws a clear link between prayer and action on the field: “The Pope’s invitation in June 2014 to religious and political Palestinian and Israeli leaders to pray for peace in the Vatican Gardens was a nice gesture. Prayers are important but political leaders should express the measures that will create peace on the ground.”

At the end of the interview, Professor Abu Sway also shares a prayer for the Holy Land, as Rabbi Rosen had done, and for it’s inhabitants: “O Allah! You are Peace, and from You comes peace, Blessed are You, the Majestic the Generous. We pray to You to guide our world leaders to live up to what You have revealed to humanity, to do what is best for our universe, for life on earth, to help end political, economic and social injustices everywhere, to put an end to colonial realities, to bridge the gap between the north and the south, and to help the peoples of the Holy Land to recognize the relationship between truth, justice and peace, and **to make the Holy Land truly the Land of Peace, and Jerusalem the city of peace**. Amen!”.

Nostra Aetate? A lesson for us Muslims

Mohammad Sammak is the Secretary-General of both the National Committee for Christian- Muslim Dialogue and the Islamic Spiritual Summit in Beirut, Lebanon. While passing through Rome in the winter of 2015, during a conference held by the National Federation of the Italian Press, he spoke of how Muslims can learn from Nostra Aetate. With clearly marked words he said: “We cannot learn if we do not realize that we need to learn, and we cannot realize this if we do not sense that we have made a mistake somewhere. We have to be extremely brave in order to recognize the need to learn from other experiences, especially when they come from outside our community.” Hinting at tensions within the Muslim community and at the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims that are not always easy, as well as at the sad spectre of violent extremism, Sammak calls for sincere

self criticism and, looking at the history of Nostra Aetate and of Vatican II, he confesses: "**I am very humbly seeking a Muslim Angelo Roncalli**".

There are many initiatives and voices that rise up in defense of pluralism and coexistence within the Muslim world, and of this Sammak is well aware, but he says: "I do not know who would have the moral authority to bring together 2,450 wise scholars and keep them together until they reach a uniform interpretation of how to live the Islamic principles in the XXI century".

At the conclusion of the year, during which we have celebrated the 50th anniversary of this document which continues to speak not only to those who are within the Catholic Church but which also offers itself as food for thought and an invitation to dialogue to anyone who reads it, Pope Francis returns to the theme of dialogue. During the Angelus on December 13, he offers words of encouragement to various members of the Focolare Movement and the Italian Islamic communities, promoters of the "Builders of Peace" initiative, saying: "**Go forward! Go forward with courage on your path of dialogue and fraternity, because we are all children of God!**".

E.D.

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